

*FEED THE HUNGRY BEE: USING POSITIVE  
PEER REPORTS TO IMPROVE THE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND  
ACCEPTANCE OF A SOCIALLY REJECTED GIRL IN  
RESIDENTIAL CARE*

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We studied how rewarding peers for publicly reporting positive aspects of a socially rejected girl's behavior affected her social interactions and acceptance. The results indicated that positive peer reports reduced negative social interactions (to near zero) and increased positive interactions (to above 70%). In addition, social acceptance ratings of the girl increased from pre- to postintervention.

DESCRIPTORS: social behavior, social interactions, residential treatment setting, peers, peer mediation

During his famous trek across America, Ken Kesey's approach to periodic ostracism of a group member (due to his or her unfriendliness or irritability) was to direct other group members to provide acknowledgment and affection or, as he put it, to "feed the hungry bee" (Wolfe, 1969, p. 105). He believed that these social commodities reduced unfriendliness and restored amicability between the ostracized member and the group. Guided by Kesey's direction and by supportive research on peer-mediated social interaction (e.g., Odom, Hoyson, Jamieson, & Strain, 1985), we evaluated how rewarding peers to publicly report positive aspects of a rejected girl's behavior would affect her social interactions and acceptance.

## METHOD

*Participant.* Our participant was Allison, a 13-year-old seventh-grade student at the middle school in the Family Home Program at Boys Town (Coughlin & Shanahan, 1991). Allison had very poor social skills and was socially rejected by virtually all peers.

*Procedures.* Prior to the intervention, two other students, Billy and Mark, were also selected as target students to avoid complaints about Allison being the center of attention. The intervention involved the awarding of points (to be exchanged later for privileges) to classmates for making positive comments about target students' behavior. During the intervention, the teacher informed students at the beginning of math class that they could earn points for making positive comments about the targeted students at the end of class. For 5 min at the end of class, the teacher solicited the comments by asking for raised hands. Points were awarded for comments that the teacher felt were specific, direct, and genuine.

*Measurement.* Observational data on social

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interactions were collected for Allison, but not for Billy or Mark. All observations were obtained from videotaped recordings or live observations (when video equipment was unavailable) of math class by the first two authors.

Allison's peer interactions were directly observed and coded as positive or negative using a 15-s (10 s to observe and 5 s to record) partial-interval recording system. Positive interactions included working cooperatively (e.g., quizzing each other on math facts), giving help (e.g., assisting others), conversation (e.g., talking or listening to peers in a pleasant manner), or any other pleasant interaction (e.g., smiling, praising). Negative interactions included negative verbal behavior (e.g., bossiness, teasing) or negative physical behaviors (e.g., physical aggression, property infringement). Intervals with no interaction were recorded as neutral.

The data reflected only the time when students could interact, which varied from day to day (baseline  $M = 9.2$  min; intervention  $M = 9.8$  min). The percentage of intervals in which positive interactions occurred was calculated by dividing the number of intervals of positive interactions by the total number of intervals in which there was an opportunity to interact. The same method was used for negative and neutral interactions.

A procedural integrity check on 37% of the intervention sessions revealed 100% implementation. Interobserver agreement was collected during 35% of the observations, distributed across experimental conditions. Total agreement for positive and negative interactions was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements and multiplying by 100%. The mean total agreement for positive interactions was 96% (range, 90% to 100%) and for negative interactions was 99% (range, 95% to 100%).

Sociometric ratings of classroom peers were collected from all students in Allison's math class at the beginning and end of the study. Students were asked to rate how much they enjoyed working with and playing with each classroom peer according to an 8-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

*Experimental design.* The effects of the peer-mediated positive reporting intervention on observed peer interactions during math class were evaluated using an ABAB reversal design.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 displays the percentage of intervals in which positive, negative, or neutral peer interactions were observed for Allison throughout all phases of the investigation. During both baseline phases, negative interactions were high and positive interactions were low. During both intervention phases, negative interactions were at near-zero levels and positive interactions occurred in more than 70% of intervals. In addition, Allison's peer acceptance ratings increased from preintervention ( $M = 1.92$ ) to postintervention ( $M = 2.55$ ) for school work and from preintervention ( $M = 1.67$ ) to postintervention ( $M = 2.45$ ) for play.

Among the possible explanations for these results is that the intervention affected the classroom as a social system. Prior to the study, Allison's negative social interactions and rejection appeared to result from a negative coercive process: Peers ignored her, she escalated her behavior, they reacted, and she reacted (cf. Patterson, 1982). The intervention appeared to reverse this coercive process by providing rewards to peers for publicly acknowledging Allison for appropriate behavior. In the new system, everyone in the classroom was a potential beneficiary: Allison because she was acknowledged, her peers because they were rewarded, and the teacher

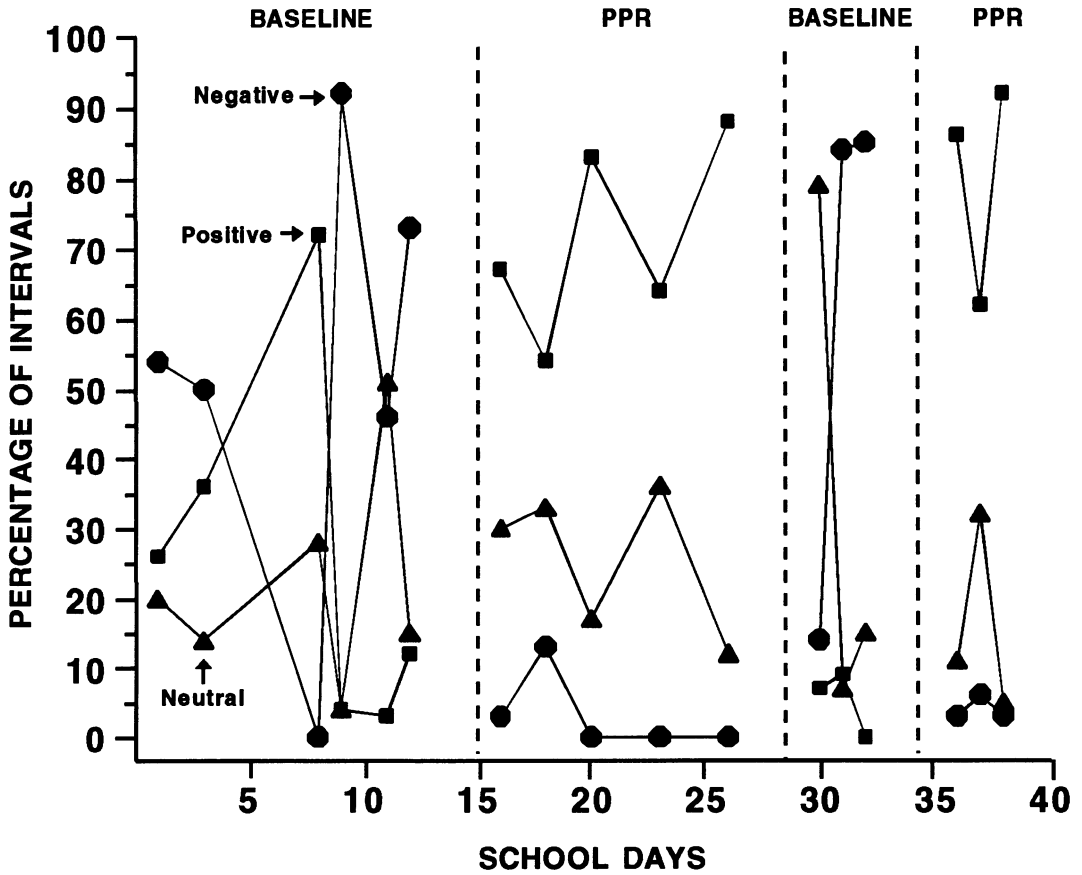


Figure 1. The percentage of intervals in which positive, negative, and neutral social interactions occurred in baseline and in the intervention (PPR) phases of the study.

because the behavior of her most problematic student improved. This account is speculative at this point because of various limitations of the study (e.g., limited time for interaction, no follow-up). Future research is planned to address these limitations and to test whether other accounts better explain these initial findings. The current results suggest that the social situation of a rejected youth may improve when peers are rewarded for acknowledging the rejected youth's positive behaviors, or, in the words of Ken Kesey, for feeding the hungry bee.

## REFERENCES

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